

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MANTRAS, FROM THE VEDA DOWN TO BUDDHIST TANTRIC PRACTICE

The subject of *mantra* is of course too vast for a single article, although Gonda¹ in one essay has an excellent coverage, especially in terms of secondary sources. I find it possible to treat the principal issues in even briefer compass. The old word *mantra* came in time to have specialized usages, and, in Buddhist literature, to be paired with *dhāraṇī* and sometimes to overlap this latter word. Our procedure will be to lay a foundation of the theme in the old Brahmanical literature, then show that the performance of *mantras* is in terms of varieties, and finally to venture conclusions in the disputed topic of the meaning of *mantras*.

An Old Indian Theory

The old Indian division of the *Veda* was into *Mantra* and *Brāhmaṇa*. Dasgupta writes, « The word Brahman originally meant in the earliest Vedic literature, *mantra*, duly performed sacrifice, and also the power of sacrifice which could bring about the desired result »². Therefore, in the standard division of the *Veda*, the *Brāhmaṇas* are texts dealing with the actual performance of the sacrifice, while the *Mantra* is the sacrifice itself. Pāṇini also opposes the terms « *Mantra* » and « *Brāhmaṇa* »³.

1. J. GONDA, *The Indian Mantra*, in « *Oriens* », 1963, pp. 244-295.

2. SURENDRANATH DASGUPTA, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1932, Vol. I, p. 211.

3. V. S. AGRAWALA, *India As Known to Pāṇini*, 2d ed., Banaras, 1963, pp. 319-320, says that for Pāṇini the *mantra* means a sacred formula whether a Vedic stanza (*rich*) or in prose (*vajus*), and that the *Brāhmaṇas* are non-*mantra* literature. M. GANGANATHA JHA, *The Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā-Sūtras of Jaimini*, Allahabad, 1911, pp. 163-164, cites *Prabhākara* for *mantra* as including « all those Vedic passages to which the learned men apply that name ». The *Sūtras* say that the name « *Brāhmaṇa* » is applied to the rest of the *Veda*. Also, both « *Mantra* » and « *Brāhmaṇa* » are referred to as « *vidhi* ».

The *Satapathabrāhmaṇa* states ⁴:

« Make ye Agni's paths to lead to the gods! » — as the text so the meaning; — « making the parents young again » — the young parents, doubtless, are speech and mind, and these two fires are speech and mind.

But the *Satapathabrāhmaṇa* also records a dispute between speech and mind as to which was the better of the two ⁵. In agreement with the other passage that these two are paths leading to the gods, they appealed to Prajāpati for a decision. When he picked mind, saying speech was only its imitator, speech, being dismayed, « miscarried » and refused henceforth to be Prajāpati's oblation-bearer. Hence, in the sacrifice for Prajāpati the performer speaks in a low voice, since the Goddess of Speech refuses to speak out on these occasions ⁶. The *Anugītā* of the *Mahābhārata* expands upon the story ⁷. When Prajāpati chose the mind, speech reminded him that after all, it was she who yielded his desires ⁸. Prajāpati mollified the goddess by declaring that there are two kinds of mind, the stationary (*sthāvara*) and the moving (*jaṅgama*). The stationary was his own. The moving, to wit, any *mantra*, or letter (*varṇa*), or sound (*svara*), was in the dominion of the cow-like goddess, from whom comes the twofold flowing. Thus the *Anugītā* says ⁹: « It (speech) always proceeds aloud, or noiseless after birth; and of these two, the noiseless one is superior to the one aloud ». These two kinds are apparently the twofold flowing. In the later refinement of the *Agnipurāṇa*, chapter CCXCIII (*Mantraparibhāṣā*, verse 28), there would be a « fourfold flowing » ¹⁰:

4. J. EGGLING, tr., *Satapathabrāhmaṇa*, Part IV, SBE, Vol. XLIII, pp. 123-124, from VIII,6,3,22.

5. J. EGGLING, tr., *Satapathabrāhmaṇa*, Part I, SBE, Vol. XII, pp. 130-131, from I,4,5,8-12.

6. Pt. GANGA PRASAD UPADHYAYA, *Satapatha Brāhmaṇam*, Vol. II, Delhi, 1969, p. 318, mentions for this story particularly *Aum Prajāpataye Svāhā Idam Prājāpataye idam na mama*, as an oblation spoken silently. However, the injunction is general in the *yajña*.

7. K. T. TELANG, *The Bhagavadgītā with the Sanatsujātiya and the Anugītā*, SBE, Vol. VIII, pp. 263-266. Critical ed., *Aśvamedhaparva*, Section 21.

8. Cf. ARTHUR BERRIEDALE KEITH, *The Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, London, 1969 reprint, p. 180: « Speech yields all desires, for by speech man expresses all desires. Speech yields all desires to him who knows this ». So from I,3,2. Also, *Satapathabrāhmaṇa*, VI,1,2, sets forth Prajāpati's union by his mind (*manas*) with speech (*vāc*) to create creatures, to wit the eight Vasus to inhabit the earth, the eleven Rudras to inhabit the intermediate space, the twelve Ādityas to inhabit the sky, and the All-gods to inhabit the quarters. Thus, *Vāc* yielded Prajāpati's desires.

9. Critical ed., 14,21,16:

*ghoṣiṇī jātānirghoṣā nityam eva pravartate /
tayoṛ api ca ghoṣiṇyoṛ nirghoṣaiva gariyaśi // 16.*

10. Ānandāśrama ed, p. 471:

*uccair japād viśiṣṭaḥ syād upāṃśur daśabhir guṇaiḥ /
jihvājape śataguṇaḥ sahasro mānasah smṛtaḥ // 28.*

The tradition¹¹ is that one uttered in a low voice is superior in the recitation by tenfold merits that loud ones have. In the case of recitation by tongue, a hundredfold merits (superior), by mind a thousandfold.

The foregoing is instructive of the ancient metaphorical language. Speech was a fire when it was a duly performed sacrifice¹², leading to the gods; and it was a cow when it brought the desired result¹³. Taking the two metaphorical references as a guide, one can separate out the instruction. Thus, when speech is a fire, there is the practice of reciting certain formulas three times, for the gods cannot be contacted by random action. In agreement, Gonda¹⁴ cites the *Maitrāyaṇī-saṃhitā* I,4,8, «because the gods are three times in accordance with truth». Also, in Buddhist non-tantric as well as tantric practice the vows are repeated three times by the disciple after the preceptor, and this implies that the vow constitutes a sacrificial truth. So also the three times of circumambulation¹⁵. One recalls here the theory of the «act of truth» (*satya-kriyā*), as has been discussed in several articles by Brown and in one by myself¹⁶. This act requires the prior surpassing performance of duty (*dharma*) in the Hindu usage, or to have accumulated much merit (*puṇya*) in the Buddhist usage. But in addition the performer must declare his appeal or command to the deity: the fact that the person desires aid from the deity does not suffice. One may observe that in this «act of truth» there is no implication of relative loudness for expected degree of fruit. Thus, even though the «act of truth» traditionally involved an attempt to derive an extra-normal fruit, the emphasis is on communication with the gods, and so it must be included with speech as a fire.

When it is the case of speech as a cow, there is the emphasis on the role of the *guru*. Accordingly we may understand the *Agnipurāṇa*, same chapter, v. 20B-21A: «A mantra heard by chance, by deceit, by

11. The tradition is alluded to in *Manusmṛti*, ch. II,85.

12. Cf. KEITH, *The Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, from II,4,1: «From the mouth came speech, from speech fire».

13. K. N. AIYAR, *The Thirty-two Vidyā-s*, Adyar, Madras, 2d ed., 1962, p. 58, points out that there is no Vidyā devoted to Vāk itself, and then cites *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, V,8,1, for the meditation on speech as Dhenu (milch cow). Two of her udders, (the *bija-s*) Svāhā and Vaṣaṭ, feed the Deva-s; a third Hanta, feeds men; a fourth one, Svadhā, the Pitṛs. Her bull is Prāṇa and calf Manas. This calf, the *manas*, is presumably *Anuṣṭiṭā's* «moving» mind.

14. *The Indian Mantra*, p. 267.

15. Cf. ARTHUR BERRIEDALE KEITH, *Rigveda Brahmanas*, Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 25; Delhi reprint, 1971, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, ii,5,5, «Thrice round the sacrifice Agni goeth like a charioteer» (he says), for he like a charioteer goes round the sacrifice».

16. W. Norman Brown's most recent article on the subject is *Duty as Truth in Ancient India*, in «Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society», Vol. 116, No. 3, June 1972, pp. 252-268. My own article is *The Hindu-Buddhist Rite of Truth-an Interpretation*, in «Studies in Indian Linguistics»; Emeneau sixtieth birthday volume, Poona, 1968, pp. 365-369.

power (i.e. forcibly), found on a leaf, and in *gāthā* form, one would generate in vain ». Presumably this is because, v. 20A, « the *guru* should bestow the *mantra* ». Hence, getting the *mantra* in any way except from the *guru* renders it worthless. The *guru* is responsible for setting up the ritual circumstances, starting in Vedic times with imparting the celebrated *Gāyatrī* or *Sāvitrī* of the *Veda*, according to P. T. S. Iyengar's eloquent remarks ¹⁷:

By sacramental use is meant the recitation of a *mantra* for producing a *saṃskāra* conceived as a subtle change in the mind and body of the reciter. A *saṃskāra* renders a man fit to perform some mystic duties... The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇam* (I,1,3) describes the *dīkṣa* for *yajñas*; in it the candidate for initiation is clothed with a skin to symbolize the foetus being encased in the amniotic membrane. The *Sāvitrī mantra* is the chief one used for bringing about *Savitā*, the generator.

This is the general implication of *mantras* down the ages, namely, that they involve the freedom to alter destiny, by ushering in a kind of rebirth. Also the initiate of the Buddhist Vajrayāna enters a new and mysterious world, as suggested by the *Guhyasamājatantra* ¹⁸: « The pledge (*saṃaya*) and vow (*saṃvara*) said to be liberated from worldly conduct, when protected by all the 'diamonds' (*vajra*), is pronounced 'practice of *mantras*' ».

Varieties in Terms of Fruits

These textual statements of *mantra* varieties exemplify speech as the « cow-of-plenty ». The previously mentioned varieties in degrees of loudness of course also belong here.

Turning to the much later Purāṇic classifications, we appeal to the *Agnipurāṇa*, the *Mantraparibhāṣā* chapter, v.14-15 ¹⁹:

17. P. T. SRINIVAS IYENGAR, *The Gāyatrī*, Madras, 1922, p. 11.

18. B. BHATTACHARYA, ed., *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, Baroda, reprint, 1967, p. 156.16-17.

19. Anandāśrama ed., p. 471:

siddhādīn kalpayed evaṃ siddho 'tyantaḡuṇair api /
siddhe siddho japāt sādhyo japapūjāhutādīnā // 14
susiddho dhyānamātreṇa sādhaḡaṇ nāsayed ariḡ /
duṣṭārṇapracuro yaḡ syān mantraḡ sarvavininditaḡ // 15.

On the occasion of the Second World Sanskrit Conference, Torino, Italy, June 1975, Professor Hélène Brunner informed the writer that these terms, according to various texts, refer to a given disciple. Her position is justified in a valuable work, « *Una tantra du nord: le Netra Tantra* », in BEFEO, Tome LXI, 1974, p. 169. However, in RASIK VIHARI JOSHI, *Le rituel de la dévotion Kṛṣṇaite*, Pondichéry, 1959, pp. 20-21, the terms are used for magical squares each containing four smaller squares, which the master evaluates to determine how the incantation will work for the disciple. Even here the terms *siddha*, etc., can be understood as types of mantras in agreement with the *Agnipurāṇa*. There seem to be different traditions for the use of these terms, and so the *Agnipurāṇa's* version is justifiably understood at face value.

One should imagine them, beginning with the Siddhas, as follows: The Siddha, by reason of surpassing merits. When there is Siddha, the Siddha is through recitation (*japa*). The Sādhya is by way of recitation (*japa*), worship (*pūjā*), oblation (*huta*), etc. The Susiddha by just meditation (*dhyāna*). The Ari would destroy the performer (*sādhaka*). Whatever mantra abounds in bad letters should be completely shunned (*sarva-vinindita*).

Here the varieties called Siddha and Sādhya evidently agree with the Vedic *mantra*, according to Haug's description²⁰.

The *Agnipurāṇa* chapter (verses 1-3A) starts with the varieties in terms of syllables: « O twice-born one, the 'garland-mantras' (*mālā-mantra*) are said to be mantras with more than twenty syllables. 'Mantras' have more than ten syllables. Less than that (*tadarvāg*), they are called '*bījas*' ». The author thereby clarifies that performance is by way of a variety, and points out that the varieties establish the speed and degree of success, namely enjoyment (*bhukti*) and liberation (*mukti*), with the longer the mantra the shorter the time.

The *Agnipurāṇa* continues (verses 3B-5A) with a well-known division by sex or gender²¹: « The species of *mantras* are of three kinds by way of the female, male, and neuter. The female *mantras* end with the wife (*jāyā*) of Vahni (the Fire God) (i.e. Svāhā). The neuter ones end with *namaḥ*. The remaining ones are the masculine ones, and these are approved in the cases of subduing and ruining (of an adversary). The female ones (approved) in the cases of eradication of disease, and minor acts. The neuter ones (approved) in other situations ». Here the varieties concern the type of *siddhi* aimed at, the female ones for appealing to inimical forces to desist, the male ones for domineering the opposing side, and the neuter ones otherwise, and so for miscellaneous fruits. Tucci in his 1928 article cites the *Sāradātīlaka* (Calcutta ed., 2d *paṭala*, 57-58) for a further clarification of the three genders, saying: « ... a *mantra* must end with one of the following words: *hum*, *phaṭ*, *svāhā*, *namaḥ*. According as a *mantra* is concluded by the first two syllables or the third or the fourth, it is called masculine, feminine, and neuter »²². He points out that the Buddhist *Tantras* have a classification of *mantra* and *vidyā*, but of course Hindu *Tantras*, such as the *Yoginī-*

20. MARTIN HAUG, *The Aitareya Brahmanam of the Rigveda*, Vol. I, Bombay, 1863, Introduction, p. 2.

21. Ānandāśrama ed., p. 470:

strīpūṇṇapūṇṇsakatvena tridhā syur mantrajātayaḥ // 3
strīmantrā vahniajāyāntā namontāś ca napūṇṇsakāḥ /
śeṣāḥ pūṇṇas te śastā vaśyocchātanakeṣu ca // 4
ksudrakriyāmayadhvaṃse strīyo 'nyatra napūṇṇsakāḥ /

22. GIUSEPPE TUCCI, *Notes on the Laṅkāvatāra*, in « Indian Historical Quarterly », IV-3, 1928; he discusses the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra's dhāraṇi-s*, pp. 553-556.

tantra, also have this ²³. In this case, the *Agnipurāṇa*'s « male mantra » (*pummantra*) is called simply « *mantra* »; and the « female mantra » (*strīmantra*) is called « *vidyā* ».

The Buddhist *Tantra Susiddhikara-mahātāntra-sādhanaopāyika-paṭala*, extant in Tibetan translation, states ²⁴:

Mantras which have few syllables and have *Oṃ* and *Svāhā*, speedily accomplish all propitiatory rites (*śāntika-karma*).

The *mantras* with a plenitude of vowels and consonants and are equipped with *Hūṃ* as well as *Phaṭ*, are used by the wise for harsh rites (*abhicāruka-karma*).

The wise should apply *mantras* other than the preceding, and which have the field of the supreme (*paramārtha*) word, for prosperity rites (*pauṣṭika-karma*).

In this description, it is a *mantra* useful for prosperity rites that is the logical candidate for equivalence to the neuter one of the other classification. The third verse of the *Susiddhikara*'s exposition does not contain the word *namaḥ*, but possibly alludes to it by the terminology « supreme word » since *namaḥ* is used to express homage to a deity or being superior to the human state.

The preceding and further indications of the present paper for the fruits of the *vidyā* permit an immediate comparison with the Upaniṣadic *vidyā*-s. Thus K. N. Aiyar points out three kinds of fruits of those *vidyā*-s according to the *Vedānta-sūtras*: (1) *duritakṣaya*, warding off of calamities; (2) *aiśvaryaprāpti*, gaining the occult powers which render the possessor invincible; (3) *kramamukti*, successive release by way of knowledge, thus reaching the *Saguṇa Brahman* ²⁵. These fruits appear to go with the female *mantra* now called *vidyā*, and seem also to illustrate the *Agnipurāṇa*'s *Susiddha* type of *mantra* amounting to meditation (*dhyāna*), especially referred to as *upāsanā*-s or meditative exercises in the Upaniṣadic context. Therefore, the *vidyā*-s of the *Upaniṣads* may be taken as the forerunner of the later tantric « female mantra ».

23. *Yoginītantra*, Venkateśvara Press, Bombay, 1962, p. 401: / *mantrāḥ pūṇdevatāḥ proktā vidyāḥ strīdevatāḥ smṛtāḥ* /. See also RANIERO GNOLI, *Luce delle Sacre Scritture (Tantrāloka) di Abhinavagupta*, Torino, 1972, p. 718, but here the *vidyā* is not associated with *SVĀHĀ*; and later (p. 721), when assigning the respective functions or operations of certain *mantras*, *SVĀHĀ* is assigned « l'oblazione » as one would expect for its operation in the old Vedic ritual; and there is no suggestion of its being a female *mantra* as mentioned in the sources which I cite.

24. Because of textual difficulties with the Peking Kanjur version of the Japanese photo edition, Vol. 9, p. 54-53, I also consulted the Narthang Kanjur version, from which I adopted the reading *don dam tshig (paramārtha-pada)*, « supreme word ». Both editions were unsatisfactory for what I translate « vowels and consonants » (the presumed original Sanskrit being *ālikāli*, for which see F. EDGERTON, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*). There was no difficulty with the remainder of the three verses.

25. *The Thirty-two Vidyās*, pp. 9-10.

A Tibetan text in my possession with numerous examples of the three kinds of *mantras* (male, female, and neuter), may be cited ²⁶. This includes the *mantras* of the group called « the four gods of the sublime heart », stressed by Atiśa, the influential Buddhist *paṇḍit* who came to Tibet in 1042:

1. *Oṃ mune mune mahāmune ye svāhā*. This is the *mantra* of Gautama Buddha, but it is also the *vidyā* of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, and so the *svāhā* emphasizes the female side, insight (*prajñā*) of the Buddha.
2. *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, the celebrated six-syllabled *mantra* of the male deity Avalokiteśvara.
3. *Oṃ tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*, the ten-syllabled *vidyā* of the goddess Tārā.
4. *Oṃ caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa hūṃ phaṭ*, the ten-syllabled *mantra* of the fierce male deity, the blue Acala.

In further agreement with the classifications, the formula *Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi* [ya] *svāhā*, is the *vidyā* of the goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* since the formula concludes the celebrated Heart-*sūtra* (*Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*). And when we find the formula for the « Healing Buddha » (*Bhaiṣajya-guru*) to conclude with a *svāhā*, this may be understood as the female healing function, as a fruit of the female formula according to previous citation of the *Agnipurāṇa*.

This same Tibetan text has many illustrations of the *namaḥ* formula, as a third kind. It is intriguing that this so-called « neuter » (*napuṃsaka*) formula was always translated into Tibetan, while the formulas referred to as « male » and « female » were transcribed phonetically. This does show that the fidelity of pronunciation of the « male » and « female » ones is an important issue, while a possible mispronouncing of the « neuter » one seems not to have been an issue. For example, the text includes: « Reciting 'I bow to the Tathāgata Akṣobhya' [completely translated into Tibetan], one purifies all the obscuration of evil *karma* and sin, and is born, by transformation from a lotus, in Akṣobhya's field (*kṣetra*) ». Since this text always specifies a fruit from the recitation of a *namaḥ* formula, and only does so for a few cases of the « male » and « female » formulas, the implication is clear that this text agrees with the *Agnipurāṇa* in assuming a well-defined fruit from the « male » or « female » kind; while the « neuter » kind, standing for all the miscellaneous cases, must have a particular fruit specified in each case, since there would be no way of inferring the fruit from the mere fact that it is a « neuter » kind.

26. The book is entitled: *Gzuñs siags dan / de bzhin gsegs pa'i mtshan / bka' 'gyur sñiñ po sogs kha 'don byed rgyu zab mo'i rigs phyogs gcig tu bkod pa don gñis lhun grub ces bya ba /*.

Speaking generally, Abhayākara-gupta in his *Munimatālaṃkāra* (extant only in Tibetan translation) states: « Furthermore, *man* is knowledge; *-traina* is protection. This knowledge (which knows) and compassion (which protects) is referred to by the term *mantra*; and the syllables of such affiliation are also called *mantras*. Those for the purpose of eliminating nescience (*avidyā*) and promoting clear vision (*vidyā*) are the *vidyā-s* »²⁷.

The overlapping with the word *dhāraṇī* can be observed from Jñānavajra's commentary on the *Vajravīdāraṇa-dhāraṇī* (a *Tantra* of the Buddhist tantric deity Vajrapāṇi). Again from the Tibetan: « *Dhāraṇī* is of two kinds: *vidyā-dh.* and *mantra-dh.* Of these, the present work is called a *mantra-dh* »²⁸. Notice that the varied usage of the word *mantra* resulted in adding the word *dhāraṇī* in this type of classification to indicate the respective evocation of female and male deities, and in the present case, as Jñānavajra mentions, it is a *mantra-dhāraṇī* since the male deity Vajrapāṇi is evoked. An earlier usage of the word *dhāraṇī*, as Tucci mentioned in the 1928 article, was to indicate a long formula made up of a series of *mantras*. Jñānavajra states in agreement, « Besides, because it retains many meanings and terms, it is called *dhāraṇī*. The *Vajrasāekhara* states that the *dhāraṇī* both provides a basis for all virtuous *dharma-s*, and renders the meaning unforgotten »²⁹. Hence, the word *dhāraṇī* practically has the usage of « memory », but more generally I render it « retention »³⁰. Among the two kinds, the *mantra-dh.* is obviously the *dhāraṇī* made up of a string of *mantras*, while the *vidyā-dh.* is perforce a *dhāraṇī* made up of a string of *vidyā-s*. If one were to translate the two expressions — granted the hazard — it could be something like « retention of incantations » (*mantra-dh.*) and « retention of charms » (*vidyā-dh.*).

Elsewhere I translated an explanation of three kinds of *mantra*: *mantra*, *vidyā* and *dhāraṇī*. In short, the *mantra* constitutes a non-duality type of recitation, i.e. the non-duality of *insight* upon the void, and *protection* from signs and discursive thought. The *vidyā* opposes nescience (*avidyā*). The *dhāraṇī* holds, i.e. retains, the *Buddha-dharma-s*³¹. This classification is consistent with the preceding explanations of this paper,

27. In the Tibetan translation, *Thub pa'i dgoṅs pa'i rgyan*, Tibetan Tanjur, Photo edition, Vol. 101, p. 241-2.2.3.

28. In the photo ed. of Tibetan Tanjur, Vol. 78, p. 169-4.3.

29. *Ibid.*, Vol. 78, p. 169-5.3.4, and worth giving: / *yaṅ na don tshig maṅ po 'dzin pas gzuṅs so / rdo rje rtse mo las dge pa'i chos thams cad kyi rten pa byed pas na yaṅ gzuṅs so / yaṅ na mi brjed pa'i don gyis na gzuṅs zhes bya'o /*.

30. This appears also to be the meaning of *dhāraṇī* as in Asaṅga's *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* (U. WOGIHARA ed., pp. 272-274) where four kinds are given and defined: « retention of doctrine » (*dharma-dh.*), « retention of meaning » (*artha-dh.*), « retention of *mantra* » (*mantra-dh.*), and « retention for acquiring patience » (*kṣānti-labhāya dh.*).

31. ALEX WAYMAN, *The Buddhist Tantras; Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*, New York, 1973, pp. 64-65.

except for having *dhāraṇī* as a third kind. The meaning of a *dhāraṇī* as a separate type from both *mantra* and *vidyā* can be observed as a memorial device. For example, there is the A-RA-PA-CA-NA formula of the large Prajñāpāramitā scripture of Buddhism³². Thus the scripture states, « The syllable A is the gate to all *dharma*s, because of their non-birth from the beginning » (*ādy-anutpannatvād*). Each of the remaining syllables is said to be a gate to all *dharma*s, RA « because they are free from dirt (*rajas*) »; PA « because of the settling of the supreme meaning (*paramārtha*) »; CA « because their decease (*cyavana*) and birth are not the object of consciousness »; NA « because they are free from names (*nāma*) ». The syllables stem from the initials of the respective terms. Therefore, A-RA-PA-CA-NA is a formula for remembering in the given order the five statements about all *dharma*s, and thus illustrates *dhāraṇī* as a memorial device.

For other ways of referring to varieties, we may resort to the *Agni-purāṇa*. In its *Mantraparibhāṣā* chapter, verses 8-10, it speaks mysteriously³³:

A *mantra* which is sleeping, or has merely been awakened, does not attain success. The time of sleep is the great evocation (*mahā-āvāha*). The waking state is the conveyance by way of the right.

One should ascertain the waking time of the *Āgneya-Manu* from the opposite of that of the *Saumya-mantra*, i.e. the day of both respectively.

(The *Svara*) should avoid the *Manu*-s when there are hostile letters, etc., bad asterisms (*ṛkṣa*) and zodiacal signs (*rāśi*), etc. The *Svara* (should avoid) the *Kuru*s when an enemy has intervened to the purpose of attaining the kingdom.

Here, the term « *Manu* » is known to mean a *mantra*, but also the *Manu*-s in Purāṇic tradition represent the solar lineage; while the *Kuru*-s represent the lunar lineage. Hence, the « *Kuru* » is also employed for a certain kind of formula, and it is evidently the « female » kind in contrast to the *Manu* as the « male » mantra. This is made certain by the end of the above citation, « when an enemy has intervened to the purpose of attaining the kingdom », at which time the *Svara* should be of the *Manu*-type that subdues the adversary and not of the *Kuru*-

32. The following exposition of the A-RA-PA-CA-NA formula is based both on EDWARD CONZE, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, Berkeley, 1975, p. 160; and on the *Munimatālaṅkāra*, Tibetan translation (cf. note 27, above), p. 240-5 to p. 241-1.

33. Ānandāśrama ed., p. 470:

suptaḥ prabuddhamātro vā mantraḥ siddhiṃ na yacchoati /
svāpakālo mahāvāho jāgaro dakṣiṇāvahaḥ // 8
āgneyasya manoḥ saumyamantrasyaitadviparyayāt /
prabodhakālaṃ jāniyād ubhayor ubhayor ahaḥ // 9
duṣṭarākṣarāśividveṣivarṇādīn varjayen manūn //
rājyalābhopakārāya prārabhyārīṇ svaraḥ kurūn // 10

type, which being female, serves for eradication of disease, etc. On the other hand, when the stellar signs are unfavorable, what is needed is the female-*mantra*, or Kuru, to appease the gods, and not the male-*mantra* which would only make matters worse. This interpretation is consistent with the *Śivasvarodaya* (v.100)³⁴: « During the flow of the Moon, poison is destroyed; the Sun leads to control over the powerful. During Suṣumnā, there is liberation. One *deva* stands in three forms ». Here the flow of the Moon is equivalent to the female-*mantra*, or Kuru; the flow of the Sun is equivalent to the male-*mantra*, or Manu. The « Manu » and the « Kuru » are respectively the *mantra* and the *vidyā* of the previous terminology. Furthermore, the *Agnipurāṇa* apparently intends the fiery *mantra* (*Āgneya-Manu*) to be taken as the male-*mantra*, and the mild (*Saumya*) one to be understood as the female-*mantra*. Hence, when the male one is awake, the female one is asleep, and vice versa. This terminology of « awake » and « asleep » may amount to a striking way of emphasizing the fact that they cannot be simultaneous, since the fiery or male-*mantra* and the mild or female *mantra* serve contrasting purposes. But since both are expressions of the goddess Vāc, the goddess herself is neither awake nor asleep.

The phrase « conveyance by way of the right » for the waking state agrees with my citation elsewhere of the Buddhist *Tantra Saṃvarodaya*: « Having entered by the left, the right is the path of leaving »³⁵. Here expiration of the breath is said to be by way of the right; in-breathing by way of the left. The *Anugītā* (Sect. 21, verse 15) says³⁶: « Then the *Prāṇa* appeared, strengthening speech. Therefore, it (*prāṇa*), having reached expiration, speech never speaks up ». According to the *Agnipurāṇa*, this is the time when the *mantra* is successful. There must also be what the *Anugītā* calls the « moving » (*jaṅgama*) mind, which is in the dominion of the goddess. In apparent agreement, there is Śrī-Lakṣmī's comment on the Buddhist tantric work *Pañcakrama*: « The cause is *prāṇa*, the effect is *mantra*; and their reality (*tattva*) is the 'reality of *mantra*' »³⁷.

Now, the *Anugītā* also says (Sect. 21, verse 14): « Verily, the goddess speech always dwells among the *Prāṇa* and *Apāna* ». (*prāṇāpānāntare devī vāg vai sma tiṣṭhati*). The *Anugītā* said earlier (verse 7)³⁸: « The

34. The popular edition of Banaras City, Bāhū Ṭhakur Prasād Gupta Bookseller, reads: / *candracāre viṣahate* (sic. for *-hati*) *sūryo balivaṣaṇṇaṇ nayeṭ* / *suṣumnāyāṇṇ bhaven mokṣa eko devas tridhā sthitaḥ* //

35. WAYMAN, *The Buddhist Tantras*, p. 159.

36. Critical ed.:

tataḥ prāṇaḥ prādurabhūd vācam āpyāyayan punaḥ / *tasmād ucchvāsaṁ āsādy na vāg vadati karhicit* //

37. This passage is in my *Yoga of the Guhyasamājatantra*; the *Arcane Lore of Forty Verses*, in press, Delhi, India.

38. Critical ed.:

tām apānaḥ patir bhūtvā tasmāt preṣyaty apānatām / *tām matim manasaḥ prāhur manas tasmād avekṣate* //

Apāna, having become lord (*pati*), consequently summons the *apānatā*. That (*apānatā*) (the inhalation) one declares the intelligence (*matī*) of the mind (*manas*). The mind in consequence considers ». Accordingly, this mind must be the « stationary » (*sthāvara*) kind, which being Prajāpati's own, is superior to the goddess.

But what does the *Agnipurāṇa* mean by saying, « The time of sleep is the great evocation »? We suppose that the *ṛṣis* were engaged in the « great evocation » per *Bṛhaddevatā* (i.3): « at the time when the seers had their vision of the mantras » (*ṛṣīṇāṃ mantradṛṣṭiṣu*)³⁹. The Jaina work *Riṣṭasamuccaya* (verse 113) says: « That dream is a dream told by a god where a *mantra* (sacred formula) is recited ». In an article citing this Jaina passage, I pointed out that the dream level of *Vāc* is called *madhyamā*, and is the kind of speech dissociated from consciousness; and so the *mantra* by repetition reaches the point where it is objectified as told by a god, as in a dream⁴⁰. Hence, the *mantra* is heard in the normal waking state and is seen (as by the *ṛṣis*) in a *yoga* state of dream. The author of this chapter of the *Agnipurāṇa* apparently wished to reassure the reader that he was not denying that an extraordinary kind of sleep is a « great evocation » (as would also be the message of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*) when he stated that « a *mantra* which is sleeping, or has merely been awakened, does not attain success ».

The Meaning of Mantras

The preceding section should have made it clear that when the texts themselves speak of varieties of *mantras*, the intention was to relate them to designated fruits. However, there is another way of classifying *mantras*, and this is in terms of their meaning. The skepticism about the meaning of *mantras* is very ancient in India, but we shall see that the problem involves different species of ritual utterance.

Certain differences of ritual formulas emerge from initial considerations. Thus, there would appear to be an inherent difference between the kind of formulas which abound among the minute details of a ritual,

39. Various tales of *ṛṣi*-s seeing *mantras* are related in the *Aitareya* and *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇas*. There is the celebrated story of Kavaṣa Ailūṣa (the « *Sūdra Ṛṣi* »), who saw the hymn of fifteen verses called the *Aponaptriya*. The Gods, because able to see the « silent praise » (*tūṣṇīmśaṃsa*) invisible to the Asuras, were able to defeat their enemy. In the episode of Indra's fight with *Vṛtra*, when the Gods were frightened away, and Indra's friends, the Maruts, exhorted him saying, « Strike, O Bhagavat! kill (*Vṛtra*)! show thy prowess! » — according to Martin Haug's translation (*The Aitareya Brahmanam*, Vol. II, Bombay, 1863, p. 192) « This saw a *Rishi*, and recorded it in the verse *vṛtrasya* . . . » KEITH, *Rigveda Brahmanas*, p. 177, agrees but is less clear.

40. WAYMAN, *Significance of Dreams in India and Tibet*, in « History of Religions », Vol. 7, No. 1 (Aug., 1967), pp. 4, 11.

and the kind of formulas which a candidate cherishes and repeats daily. For example, in Buddhist *tantra* ritual the candidate is drawn into the near retinue of the *maṇḍala* deities as he pronounces the so-called « diamond pledge » (*vajrasamaya*), *ĀH KHAM vīra HŪM*⁴¹, but this does not seem to occur in another ritual circumstance⁴². Among the daily recitation types of formula is of course the *Gāyatrī* of the Hindus and the formula *OM maṇi padme HŪM* of the Buddhists. It can be stated generally that the disciple daily repeats the formula associated with his tutelary deity (*iṣṭadevatā*).

Of a different nature are the three mystical utterances (*vyāhṛti*) which the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* ascribed to Prajāpati⁴³. He uttered *Bhūr* which became this earth, subsequently to be described by the layers of Pātāla, the underworld. He uttered *Bhuvah*, which became this firmament, subsequently to be described by the stories of the upon-world, the *bhūmi*-s. He uttered *Svar*, which became that sky, later the pinnacle of existence or heaven (*svarga*). In the Buddhist *Tantras* there is a set of seed syllables, *Om*, *Āh*, *Hūm*, repeated innumerable times. The three are correlated to the three mysteries of the Buddha and to the numerous threefold groups. There is something in common between the three *vyāhṛti*-s of the Brāhmanic literature and the three seed syllables of the Buddhist *Tantras*. That is, both sets have an element of the memorial device, the *dhāraṇī*. By this I would suggest that in reciting the sets of three one may recall the associations — in the case of the three *vyāhṛti*-s, the contents and deities of the three worlds⁴⁴; in the case of the three seed syllables, the various threefold sets, as with *Om* remembering the night, with *Āh* the day, and with *Hūm* the juncture of day and night⁴⁵. So understood, the memorial syllables have no meaning in the ordinary sense; their meaning is in what they intend by way of the respective associations.

On the other hand, numerous *mantras*, and the Vedic ones are principally of this nature, consist of, or include words with meaning to those who understand the language (here Sanskrit). Naturally, even allowing for such meaning, there is occasionally some obscurity, with

41. WAYMAN, *The Ritual in Tantric Buddhism of the Disciple's Entrance into the Maṇḍala*, in « *Studia Missionalia* », Vol. 23 (1974), p. 45.

42. In Brahmanism probably the most extensive collection of these occasional mantras is now to be found in the *Srautakośa*, of which the English section has been published in two monumental volumes by the Vaidika Saṁsodhana Maṇḍala, Poona, 1958 and 1962.

43. According to the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, XI, I, 6, 2-4, Prajāpati was born along with the year, and when first he spoke the words *Bhūr*, etc., did so like a child with words of one and two syllables; cf. J. EGGEING, tr., Part V, SBE XLIV, pp. 12-13.

44. To which may be added the three strides of Viṣṇu according to *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* I.9.3.10. Viṣṇu strode on earth by means of the *Gāyatrī* meter, in the air by means of the *Triṣṭubh* meter, and in the sky by means of the *Jagatī* meter.

45. Cf. WAYMAN, *The Buddhist Tantras*, Tables 14 and 15, for a number of threefold sets going with the three seed syllables.

difficulty of interpretation. In the classification of *mantra* as the male formula and *vidyā* as the female one, there are numerous cases with formulas having standard word meanings, with additional syllables at both ends that are of the memorial type. Since the *Tārā vidyā* (*Om tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*) occurs in the *Guhyasamājatantra*, Chap. XIV, *Ratnākaraśānti* in the *Kusumāñjali-guhyasamāja-nibandha-nāma* has a verse (his own?)⁴⁶:

Precisely *buddhi* (discrimination) is the root of knowing. It achieves through offering. Hence, at the beginning of the *mantra* is *Om*, and it is made clear at the end with *Svāhā*.

This verse explains the *Om* as associated with *buddhi*, the root of knowing, which comes first; and explains the *Svāhā* as the clarification or revelation at the end⁴⁷. The same work explains the *Tārā vidyā*: *Tāre* (« O Tārā ») because she rescues by bringing to the other side (i.e. is the *pāramitā*). Now *tud-* is pain; *tuttā*, suffering; *Tuttāre* (« O Tārā from suffering »), because she rescues from pain. Then *Ture* (« O Turā, the fast one »), because she is fast, i.e. rescues speedily. Thus *Ratnākaraśānti* explains the *vidyā* as composed of two kinds of elements, the syllables *Om* and *Svāhā* which have a general intention no matter what the *vidyā*, and then the individual words of the particular *vidyā* which have meanings of the lexicons along with grammatically defined inflexions, in this case the vocatives.

But also, even when the words of the *mantra* appear to have the ordinary meanings of words, there can arise an argument over their meaning and their function, just as happens in the case of any other ancient sentence which now can occasion an argument between prospective translators. For example, in the *Nyāya-Mañjarī* (section translated in « The Calcutta Review », Oct. 1955), the opponent had argued that a *mantra* renders its assistance its assistance to a Vedic rite only by its recitation, referring to the case of the *mantra*, « Hear, oh slabs of stone! » (*śṛṇota grāvāṇaḥ*), and observing that stones cannot hear. The author of the *Nyāya-Mañjarī* replied: « *Śṛṇota grāvāṇaḥ* is... a

46. This is in the Tibetan Tanjur, Japanese photo ed., Vol. 64, p. 168-3: / *blo tsaṃ ŋid šes rtsa ba yin* / *mchod pa las ni rab tu byed* / *des na śhags kyi thog mar Om* / *mthar ni Svā-hā zhes gsal byed* /.

47. For some other explanations of *Om*, see K. V. GAJENDRAGADKAR, *Neo-Upaniṣadic Philosophy*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1959, pp. 26-29. It should be understood that Ratnākaraśānti's explanation has been specialized for the case of a *vidyā*, as shown by the *Svāhā* at the end. That is, the *Om* is here the seed from which comes the successes attributed to the *vidyā*. Since the preeminent success of a *vidyā* is the divine knowledge leading to liberation, the *Om* is here explained as the root of knowing. The term *buddhi* is here involved, apparently since it is the process leading to the Buddha, who has been enlightened. While the term is employed in various ways in the Indian texts, the usage here seems about the same as in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Chap. II, verse 39, including: « associated with which *buddhi*, O Pārtha, you will get rid of the bondage of *karma* ».

miraculous act by the influence of which slabs of stone can even hear ». In this case, both sides of the argument have a point. The opponent could argue that this remark just comes up in the course of the ritual, and evocation is more to be ascribed to the daily-recited formula like the *Gāyatrī*. The *Nyāya-Mañjarī* author is also on good ground, because he is emphasizing the role of faith or conviction, that those going through the ritual should believe that events take place as stated (whether or not they do), this firm belief ensuring the success of the whole ritual. In any case, this shows that the insiders of a cult frequently do not agree on the meaning or function of a *mantra*; and so, the meaning or use of *mantras* cannot be established by the criterion that all the followers of the cult agree upon it⁴⁸.

Then notice also how some formulas which seem meaningless are ascribed meanings in the commentaries! Once I noticed in a commentary on the Buddhist *dhāraṇī* of Vimalośṇīṣa these *vidyā*-s: / *kṣaṇa kṣaṇa* / *kṣiṇi kṣiṇi* / *kṣunu kṣunu* /⁴⁹. As usual these were transcribed into phonetic Tibetan letters. The explanations were translated; and the three pairs were explained respectively: « Guard, guard! » (*sruṅs śig sruṅs śig*), « Rescue, rescue! » (*skyobs śig skyobs śig*), « Nourish, nourish! » (*tshos śig tshos śig*). Besides, it appears that any *mantra* which is « meaningless » in terms of its constituents might also be considered meaningful in terms of the intended fruits to be derived from the ritual utterance⁵⁰.

Still another case is when a *mantra* appears meaningful, and yet the commentary ascribes an unexpected meaning⁵¹. Thus a work called *Balimālikā* preserved in the Tibetan Tanjur canon, consists of *mantras* transcribed into Tibetan, and a translation into Tibetan is regularly added. Once I noticed therein the *mantra hana hana*, which we would expect to mean « Destroy, destroy! ». But the translator added the Tibetan *snun snun*, which means « Prick, prick! » and seems to preserve a Vedic meaning of the verb *han-*, « to hurl a dart upon »⁵².

48. Cf. JHA, *The Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā-Sūtras*, pp. 43-54, which takes up various arguments by the opponent to the effect that mantras are meaningless and then replies defending the significance of *mantras*.

49. This *dhāraṇī* has a very long title, and the author of its commentary is known in Tibetan as Lhan cig skyes pa'i rol pa (*Sahajalalita); it has No. 2688 in the Tohoku Catalog of the Kanjur-Tanjur; and the passage is in Derge Tanjur, *Rgyud*, Vol. Thu, f. 285b-1,2.

50. JHA, *The Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā-Sūtras*, p. 53, informs us « Examples of the interpretation of apparently meaningless *mantras* are given in the *Tantravārtika* (Translation, pp. 100-101) ».

51. Or, again, as Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Wogihara ed., p. 273) puts it: « Precisely this meaning of them (i.e. the *mantra* words) is, to wit, fruitlessness » (*ayam eva caiśam artho yad uta nirarthatā*).

52. I originally consulted this work in the Derge Tanjur, where it is included in the *Rgyud* (Tantra commentary) section but in the Narthang as well as the Peking Tanjur editions it is placed among the miscellaneous works concerned with grammar and lexicography.

In conclusion, the charge that *mantras* are meaningless is to be grouped with the innumerable other charges of meaninglessness that have been traded back and forth in India in past millenia, and the natural retort is that the opponent has either not been in a position, or has not taken pains to ascertain the meaning. And it is also obvious from the present study that later religious practices of India, such as the Buddhist *Tantra*, have a profound debt to the Vedic religion.